

## Macalester Journal of Philosophy

---

Volume 19  
Issue 1 *Spring 2010*

Article 11

---

10-7-2010

# The Positive Take on Nothingness: Transcendence as the Metaphysical Foundation of Individual Fulfillment

Lauren Roso  
*Macalester College*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/philo>

---

### Recommended Citation

Roso, Lauren (2010) "The Positive Take on Nothingness: Transcendence as the Metaphysical Foundation of Individual Fulfillment," *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 11.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/philo/vol19/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Macalester Journal of Philosophy by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).

## The Positive Take on Nothingness: Transcendence as the Metaphysical Foundation of Individual Fulfillment

*Lauren Roso*

Human beings are distinguished from other entities in the world primarily by the fact that the nature of existence is an issue for them. Human beings are capable of asking the question of being in the broad sense: Why does there exist something rather than nothing? What is being? What is the meaning of this being? As Martin Heidegger says in the beginning of his monumental *Being and Time*, *Dasein* (human existence) is distinctive in its *material* existence due to the fact that it is also *ontological*, in that the nature of its existence is an issue for it.<sup>1</sup> *Dasein*, as human being, is at once an animal concerned with survival, while at the same time endowed with the ability to question itself, to inquire into the very nature of its being—it is transcendence embodied.

Since human nature is comprised of both physical existence and the metaphysical ability to question this existence—and act towards developing it—we are necessarily concerned with what it means to be one's own self. Philosophy has recently found recourse in the natural sciences and has taken a more positivistic approach in this search for self-certainty and identity. Advancement in the field of neuroscience have given us detailed descriptions of the processes in our brains, and psychology has discovered common structures with which humans use to gain a sense of self. These developments in the physical realm of human

---

<sup>1</sup> Heidegger's definition from *Being and Time*

existence have been of the utmost importance. With such progress, however, comes a tendency to overlook the metaphysical side of what it means to be a human endowed with the ability to question. In each of these empirical investigations, it must be noted that “the questioner is made part of the question...it is we who ask, here and now, on behalf of ourselves.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, we are engaged agents unable to adopt a “view from nowhere”. As engaged agents, we always bring with us more to the investigation than we realize. That is, we ask the question given a specific context and have an agenda as to why we ask the question in the first place. As Heidegger notes, we ultimately ask these questions on behalf of ourselves. All philosophical investigation into the nature of personal identity can, in the end, be reduced to the question: “What does it mean that I, whatever ‘I’ is, exist?”

In this paper, I aim to restore primacy to the transcendental foundation of personal development and construction, as well as our holistic, phenomenological experience of such development.<sup>3</sup> If being is to remain an object of investigation, it is fundamental to note that the question of being implies the question of the nothing. By taking seriously this notion of nothingness, I plan to show that it is what allows anything to be manifested at all. Metaphysical concepts—concepts that reach beyond the scope of empirical investigation—such as nothingness, lack, and negation, allow for the continual development of human identity and the exploration of possibilities. These concepts

---

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993) 94.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term holistic to indicate the inseparability of subjectivity and objectivity in human individuals, and the engagement and dependence of individuals on their surroundings.

emanate from the primary nothingness, which is beyond empirical investigation and must be examined phenomenologically in our experience of its effects. It is because we lack and are hence tied to the nothing (as potentiality) in a unique way that individual flourishing is possible. By beginning with Heidegger's primacy of the nothing, I plan to explicate how human autonomy, choice, creativity, understanding, and meaning are constructed on a metaphysical basis. Max Stirner then illustrates how such a process is enacted through the negation of a static 'self,' in preference for a dynamic, active overcoming existence that seizes upon possibilities. Such a theory is explicated by Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of Will to Power, and can be extended beyond the realm of egoism by embracing Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic method of understanding. In the end, I hope that it appears clear that this nothing does not turn metaphysics into a negative nihilism, but, given the lack of a set truth that is to be sought, rather lends to the experience of individual fulfillment and freedom "the openness of Being as such and the brilliance surrounding whatever comes to light."<sup>4</sup>

### **Metaphysical Nothing as the Fundamental Precondition for Being**

In order to show how the nothingness allows beings and possibilities to be revealed, we must first investigate the nothingness itself. We come to a dead end, however, when we try to objectify the nothing in order to investigate it: "The question deprives itself of its own subject."<sup>5</sup> We can not ask the question without turning the nothing into a

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 91

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 96

*something* to be investigated. Nor can we assert that the nothing is a complete denial of that which is, as logicians tend to do. This assertion makes the nothing parasitic on the totality of positives. This cannot be the case, however, based on the very rules of logic. According to logic, denial is a type of understanding, and therefore the denial of all that is presupposes an understanding of the totality of what is. We are unable to grasp the world thematically as whole due to our finite nature as human individuals and our limited access to the world in its entirety. As is clear, it is necessary to approach this question from a different direction and grasp a fuller understanding of the nothing.

*Dasein*, as human existence, is by definition its “being-there” (*da*= there, *sein*= to be). Heidegger creates this term to capture the nature of human existence in so far as it is always found in a relational situation with others, and this setting is inextricably tied to its being. It is incomprehensible to disengage oneself from the world and grasp the world in its entirety—this overlooks the fact that a world exists only insofar as one is involved in it. Given this nature of human comportment, Heidegger suggests investigating this illogical nothing from within our own experience of it (phenomenologically). He claims that in every experience of ours, there exists a semblance of the whole to which each act is related. The whole, for Heidegger, is totalized by the ultimate purpose, the “for-the-sake-of” with which *Dasein* is concerned. In every case this is ultimately the existence of *Dasein* itself. Though we are primarily and for the most part unaware of this, upon reflection we see the relational nature of all our actions, of the “in-order-to” for which we undertake all endeavors. This pre-reflective conception of the whole of our relations and comportment is always accompanied with a *feeling* that

extends beyond a single given situation, in anticipation of the future and remembrance of the past. Heidegger calls this feeling a mood, or an overall, transcendental attitude. By finding ourselves in a particular mood, or as particularly attuned, we relate ourselves to the whole of our situation as we are concerned with the world. *Dasein*, through its attunement to the world and relational web of actions, makes sense of the whole through its very existence. In Heidegger's words, "having a mood brings Being to its 'there'."<sup>6</sup> Now that the whole can be grasped, what particular attunement would allow for the revelation of the nothing?

Heidegger concludes that the basic mood of *Angst* brings us face to face with the nothingness in its nihilating act, wherein it allows for the revelation of what is: "The nothingness appears in *Angst* alongside that which is a whole."<sup>7</sup> The notion of *Angst* employed here is not its use in the vernacular sense. Original *Angst* does not take a direct object; this is the case with one of its modifications—fear. Rather, in this *Angst*, "we lose our heads with regard to the whole... we say 'it feels alien to me'... all things sink into indifference."<sup>8</sup> We begin to lose hold over ourselves, and realize that we are unstable. Our finitude and contingency are revealed to us as the whole of our world withdraws. The nothing has its reality and existence only in so far as it acts upon our world through a repulsion of what is. It is a threat that every possibility will be annihilated. However, while the nihilating nothing repels the whole of what is, it also simultaneously reveals it to us. In this definition, the

---

<sup>6</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962) 173.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993) 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

nothing remains part of the whole as the “reference to the sinking away of what it is as a whole” which it repels from itself.<sup>9</sup> This activity is essentially *oppressive* for *Dasein*. It is only through *Dasein*’s transcendence into the nothing that “it emerge[s] out of the manifest nothing as such a *Dasein* in each case already.”<sup>10</sup> The nothing, in repelling the totality of *Dasein*’s worldly relations, oppresses *Dasein* and allows for the future possibilities to be seen as that which may be lost through death.

We experience the nothing in a state of *Angst* solely through its nihilating power. It does not exist in the material, empirical sense, but functions only as something which *Dasein* can relate itself to, in anticipation, just as one relates herself to any future event not yet actualized. In this way, nothingness is analogous to the notion of imminent death. *Dasein* can experience death only “in a way of Being [related] towards death.”<sup>11</sup> The nothing ‘is not’, just as death can never be explicated by anyone living. We can only encounter the nothing and death through our Being-towards-the-end. If *Dasein* “is as an understanding potentiality-for-being,” and death is the “possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all,” then death functions as the idea of the nothing.<sup>12</sup> Nothing accordingly takes on the signification of the *impossibility of any potential being*: “Death, as a possibility, gives *Dasein* *nothing* to be ‘actualized’, *nothing* which *Dasein*, as actual, could itself *be*.”<sup>13</sup> This quote

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 9

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962) 277.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 274,307.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

references the double signification of the word nothing, for there is nothing left to be done, and there is the possibility that *Dasein* will ‘actually’ be nothing.

While this may sound like a grim prospect, it is instead that which allows for the revelation of possibilities. It is also important to note that Heidegger does not call for one to live continually in *Angst*. In fact, individuals primarily do not live in authentic angst, but because the nothingness functions nonetheless continually, possibilities are still revealed. Our comportment towards the end begins whenever *Dasein* does, for as human beings, we are always projecting ourselves onto things which are yet to be realized (our potentialities). Death is merely the final end of this projection into the future, and is always in some way within the scope of our comportment: “Death is a way to be, which *Dasein* takes over as soon as it is. ‘As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die.’”<sup>14</sup> The nihilating of the nothing occurs all along but is only experienced in its totality through *authentic* Being-towards-Death. Authentic Being-towards-Death does not divert itself from the possibility of impossibility, but instead has an *understanding* of death in the sense that it is a “Being towards this [ownmost and *non-relational*] possibility without either fleeing it or covering it up.”<sup>15</sup> Authentic Being-towards-Death brings *Dasein* face to face with the nothing. Anticipation, the temporal counterpart to the mood *Angst*, is the mode of being which characterizes this authenticity, as authentic anticipation allows one to be “free for one’s own death...liberated in such a way that for the first time one can authentically understand and choose among the [actual]

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 289.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 305.



possibilities lying ahead of that possibility that is not to be outstripped (death).”<sup>16</sup> By anticipating the ultimately non-relational, the prospect of immanent death, the relational-totality of our existence is “repelled,” or stands out in contrast against nothingness. This repulsion allows our relational possibilities to come forward and be revealed.

### **Transcendence and Mutability of Stirner’s ‘I’ through Internal Negation**

The openness to possibilities revealed through Heidegger’s notion of the nihilating of the nothing leads us to another consideration when it comes to the formation of individuality and its fulfillment. As Jean-Paul Sartre claims, humans are unique in that they are both a physical, material substance and a subject who cares for its being and is capable of acting towards this end. In the case of human individuals, one’s objective nature and subjective nature are intimately connected and inseparable. These are the equivalents of the dual nature we saw in Heidegger, where the object is an ontic, factual being, and the subject is *Dasein* in so far as it is an open potentiality for being and always projected towards its own end (for its own sake). The problem with human nature, however, is that individuals are never *wholly* objective or *wholly* subjective. Transcendental subjectivity, what sets us apart from our animal counterparts, always lacks. The existence of human desire is sufficient proof of this. While the transcendent subject is capable of surpassing the present, reaching into the nothingness, and realizing possibilities, because of this openness it lacks full positive being in the sense of a pure object. Given this fact, Sartre claims that human beings are

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 308.

therefore the foundation of their nothingness, but not of their being— “Human reality is a perpetual surpassing toward a coincidence with itself [as a thing] which is never given.”<sup>17</sup> Such a coincidence is possible only in death, where the transcending subject meets with its pure objective, material nature—the corpse. As we have seen, this is fundamentally *impossible to experience*.

Once again, we need not be discouraged by the inability to integrate these two different modes of human existence. Precisely, it is the lacking nature of the transcendental subject that allows for the exploration of the possibilities revealed alongside the nothingness. The original transcendence of the subject is not towards complete identification with an object, but rather towards another expression of itself *as* subject—“the missing [subjectivity] is the Possible.”<sup>18</sup> Individuals strive for identification with an absent expression of itself as a subject which at the same time it both *is* (as potentiality) and *lacks* (yet to be realized). In order for an individual to attain the status of a pure object, all of its possibilities would have to be enacted simultaneously. This is precisely what leads to the idea of Supreme Being, or God. Nevertheless, it is through striving for this imagined wholeness that we hold ourselves into the metaphysical nothingness and actively construct our imagined ‘selves’: “The possible does not exist as a pure representation, but as a real lack of being which, qua lack, is beyond being. The possible is possibilized to the exact degree that the [transcendental subject] *makes itself be*.”<sup>19</sup> It

---

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984) 139.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 153.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 155.

is the responsibility of the individual to make itself through the exploration of these possibilities.

Perhaps the greatest proponent of developing the self, or in his terms, the ego, is German philosopher Max Stirner (1806-1856). Though cursorily taken as an egoist and a nihilist, upon closer examination, his writings can be read as an affirmation of development, change, and progress in the name of the individual. By realizing the authority of and upholding the essentially egotistic nature of the subject, Stirner embraces the implications of this internal nothingness by affirming the nihilating powers made possible by this internal lack lived by every individual.

The traditional critique of Stirner, originally posed by his contemporary Young Hegelians, and Karl Marx in particular, states that while Stirner vehemently opposes the idea of a stagnant, perfect concept that rules over individuals, a stagnant whole objective nature towards which to strive, he merely replaces theology's "God," humanism's "Man" or Marx's "The People" with an equally abstract absolute concept, that of the 'I'. As West says in a recent book review, "Stirner, as Marx and his other critics retorted, succumbs no less to the "holy" [as a totalizing concept]—namely, to the unique, individual 'I' that Stirner exalts above everything else."<sup>20</sup> This has led to Stirner's most famous nick-name, bestowed to him by his fellow Young Hegelians, that of "Saint Max". Similarly, Sidney Hooks argues that Stirner replaces the totalizing concepts of the past with his own, that of the ego. Since there is little textual evidence to show the importance of the remainder of society in Stirner's schema—the remainder being the other egos other than his

---

<sup>20</sup> Thomas G. West, "Max Stirner's Egoism Review," *The Journal of the History of Philosophy* 18 (1980) 102.

own—I choose to take the argument in another direction. The basis of the misinterpretation, that of the sole importance of the complete ‘I’, lays in the false concept of the ‘I’ which his critics cursorily attributes him. As we will see, Stirner’s conception of the ‘self’ is a negative one, one which must continually be overcome in the favor of realizing new possibilities. Given the openness of his conception of individuality, Stirner allows for the development and nihilation of the stagnant self, as well as allows for the possibility of individual development to include contributions from other ‘egoists’ who are also striving to avoid essentializing terms. Both Saul Newman and Caleb Smith read Stirner along these lines and apply his conception of individual freedom to notions of both solitude and solidarity. They argue Stirner’s theses both practically and ideologically, essentially refuting the assertion made by West at the end of his review, which read: “I once heard it said of Stirner that he could have been a character in Dostoyevsky’s *Possessed*. That still seems to me a fitting epitaph for a peripheral thinker whose work scarcely deserves the attention lately bestowed upon it.”<sup>21</sup> To preface their discussion regarding the possibility of collective intercourse (to be taken up later in the paper), I wish to add a reading of his ‘I’ that would allow for this intersubjective receptivity from the outside.

Instead of suggesting a striving towards immortality or wholeness found in a perfect being, Stirner affirms the self-dissolving, nihilating transcendence that each human is. He acknowledges that each individual is an egoist, projected into the future for his own sake (*Dasein*) and bound to be in constant strife with itself as well with others. It is important

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 103.

to note that Stirner's egoist does not exist in isolation, but must develop himself within a given context, or a Heideggerian "there". This strife found in society far from discourages him. Instead, he embraces this competition to further extend the individual's power of nihilation and transcendence, seeing each instance as an opportunity for asserting individual will<sup>22</sup>. The egoist seizes the chance to nihilate his 'own most' possibilities and transcend them towards others: "[the egoist] exists only in raising himself, he exists only as *not remaining what he is*; otherwise, he would be done, dead."<sup>23</sup> This process is continuous and alone is what constitutes the essence of human life. When a human settles on some specific label, on some designation provided by either him or society at large, "then he has dug his grave."<sup>24</sup> Of course an individual is always determined by the situation in which he is a contributing part, but the point is to never let any designation become totalizing, where there is no room left to develop and live.

Destruction for Stirner is a constructive action, as is seen through his conception of the internal negation. He spells out the positive and exceptionally powerful potential contained in the ability to transcend possibilities—seizing upon some, nihilating them, and then seizing upon others: "But it is not the ego that is all, but the ego destroys all, and only the self-dissolving ego, the never-being ego, the finite-ego is really I...I speak of me, the transitory ego."<sup>25</sup> Human

---

<sup>22</sup> As we will see later, this strife within society actually allows for deeper inter-subjective understanding, which in turn enhances the egoist's individual life.

<sup>23</sup> Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, trans. Steven T. Byington (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2005)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 163.

beings are unique in the fact that their lives are transitory and that they have the ability for dynamic change. By embracing the implications of mortality, it is here that he is most closely aligned with Heidegger. Stirner claims that “only the [abstract, objectified concept] ‘man’ in me is immortal”, and being an ‘Un-man’, in the sense of an individualized subject endowed with transcendence, is possible for human beings by the fact that they are mortal and self-dissolving.<sup>26</sup> Here one is reminded of Heidegger’s ‘being-towards-death’, and how the mortality of *Dasein* allows an individual to pursue possibilities with meaning. If one were an immortal whole, one would be stagnant, void of meaning, and barred from any creative action. Due to the transcendental subject’s essential lack and power to transcend the nothing, Stirner is allowed to say “I am not nothing in the sense of emptiness, but I am the creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything.”<sup>27</sup>

Stirner’s declaration that “Nothing is more to me than myself!” has often been read as an endorsement of selfish egoism. It appears that he cares only for his self, and nothing more. However, this statement can also be read in light of the previous arguments. Stirner’s conception of the ‘self’ is a negative one, as the ‘self’ is primarily defined by others through the consent on one’s part to the value judgments to which one is subjected. It is stagnant, inert, objectified transcendence in the same vein as the designation ‘man’ is arresting, lifeless, and immortal by virtue of its inactivity and passivity (in short, a stagnant object). Keeping in mind this static view of ‘self-hood’, the statement reads

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 157-159.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 7

that for the individual, *the internal nothing, the potential for transcendence and possibilities, is always outstripping, always overcoming and transforming the stagnant 'self'*. The 'self' is a tiny abstract kernel taken in a given time slice that neglects the individual's possibilities and reduces the human being to an inert object. The nothing, on the other hand, shapes life in an immanent way, drawing from the authentic concepts of past, present, and future. The nothing, always with more meaning than the stagnant 'self', is what allows positive creation out of one's free possibilities.

### **Creation vs. Stagnation**

Numerous parallels can be drawn between the works of Max Stirner and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Though there is no evidence to show that Nietzsche was familiar with his works, both held that in order to battle negative nihilism, individuals must continually build themselves up through the self-overcoming that is the foundation of the Will to Power. In fact, Nietzsche holds transcending your immediate situation towards other possibilities as the essence of life: "All great things are the cause of their own destruction, through an act of self-cancellation: the law of life, the law of necessary self-overcoming, wills it so."<sup>28</sup> Here we see Nietzsche endorsing Stirner's theory that whenever an individual stops developing (through internal negation) and becomes stagnant, he is no longer living in the proper sense. This leads Nietzsche to explore the concepts of creativity and reinterpretation as the ultimate form of self-expression and self-mastering.

---

<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 135.

In an aphorism in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche poses a dialog between two individuals:

A.: You are searching? Where is *your* corner and star within the real world? Where can *you* lie down in the sun so that an abundance of well-being comes to you, too, and your existence justifies itself? Let everyone do that for themselves—you seem to be saying—and let everyone put out of his mind generalities and worries about others and about society!

B.: I want more than that; I am no seeker. *I want to create for myself a sun of my own.*<sup>29</sup>

Through the response of person B, Nietzsche responds to those who hold his position as selfish and disconcerted with the rest of society. He does not call for narrow-minded self interest, but rather a continual creation of meaning that would, in turn, give meaning to the individual's life. What allows for the continual construction of meaning is not limited to the physical world around us, but extends to the subjective, metaphysical realm of re-appropriation and re-interpretation which can be imposed onto the physical world. This is how we arrive at a plurality of meaning provided by nature. As Nietzsche says, "in the long run, it is enough to create new names [significations] and valuations and appearances of truth in order to create new things."<sup>30</sup> In other words, what are empirically given things without the valuation assigned to them by human beings?

---

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, ed. Bernard Williams, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 180.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 70.



Nietzsche calls creators of this sort ‘Intuitive Man’ as opposed to ‘Rational Man’. While ‘Rational Man’ is concerned with the Will to Truth, a will to create a rigid world that contains no room for reinterpretation and possibilities, ‘Intuitive Man’, by recognizing the fact that the human conception of nature is necessarily constructed through our employment of metaphor and language, instead exercises an undifferentiated Will to Power. Nietzsche praises “intuitive” creativity on the lack of its assertion that there is some truth at which to arrive. Such a lack encourages one to interpret, reinterpret, misinterpret, and basically *play* with the world we find before us. ‘Intuitive Man’ is still subjected to the false nature of the world, however, his intellect is “richer, prouder, more luxuriant, more skillful, more daring; with a creator’s delight it throws metaphors into confusion, shifts boundary stones of abstraction.”<sup>31</sup> Instead of the Will to Truth as the basis of creation, the Will to Power and therefore the process of self-overcoming can be exercised. A stagnation of overcoming and re-interpretation stands opposed to one of Nietzsche’s most central arguments:

“... there is a world of difference between the reason for something coming into existence in the first place and the ultimate use to what it is put...[it] can be reinterpreted in the service of new intentions, repossessed, repeatedly modified to a new use by a power superior to it; everything that happens in the organic world is part of a process of overpowering, mastering, and that, in turn, all overpowering and

---

<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche “On Truth and Lies in their Extramoral Sense.” *The Friedrich Nietzsche Reader*. Ed. Keith Ansell Pearson, Duncan Large (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006) 114.

mastering is a reinterpretation, a manipulation, in which the previous 'meaning' must be obscured or completely effaced."<sup>32</sup>

As human beings, we alone create meaning. We are capable of transcending the given, reaching into the nothingness which is potentiality, and creating values that structure our reality. Here again is an example of how metaphysical actions influence and affect our physical situations: "It is we, the thinking-sensing ones, who really and continually *make something that is not yet there*: the whole perpetually growing world of valuations, perspectives, affirmations, negations...Nature is always value-less...we are the givers and granters! Only we have created the world that concerns human beings!"<sup>33</sup>

### **The Creation of Meaning and Being through Hermeneutic Discourse**

As Nietzsche argues, this creation of being is effected through reinterpretation. Only by reinterpreting, creating meaning, and therefore actualizing our potentialities can we construct a sense of self. For Nietzsche, this is the only way to lift oneself up. It follows from this argument that the more interpretation and understanding we come by, the fuller our lives will be. This is consistent with Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of the hermeneutic broadening of horizons, in which there is an initial disagreement between two parties which is resolved and mediated through

---

<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 58.

<sup>33</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 171.

hermeneutic conversation. Since meaning is gained and constructed through this interaction, it leads to the construction of a fuller sense of self. These horizons provide the solid ground for the actualization of potentialities, the context or “there” in which one is involved. It is at this point I want to return to the figure of Stirner’s “self-dissolving egoist” and his relations with others. Though Stirner says little of collective hermeneutic dialogue, I do not see how his endorsement of such a broadening of horizons would run contrary to his central egoism. Greater self-overcoming is realized through hermeneutic debate, in which the individual is engaged with something foreign and reincorporates it into his own sense of self, for his own sake.

Both Smith and Newman discuss the possibility of Stirner’s egoist reaching out of himself and engaging with others. Their discussion is taken up in a penal sense as Stirner touches upon the freedom of the individual within an authoritarian system, such as a prison. Smith claims “if Stirner is going to be put to use again, it might be against these very concrete institutions of solitude and unfreedom.”<sup>34</sup> In such a setting of solitude, Stirner once again prescribes a turning to oneself, in which “what is in you is brought to light, is brought to revelation.”<sup>35</sup> This seems to be another insular command to care only for yourself. However, if we acknowledge that Stirner has in mind a dynamic possibility for self-development and change as “what is in you,” we see that this does not preclude engagement and understanding of others. As Gadamer claims, this is truly how one grows and develops through

---

<sup>34</sup> Caleb Smith, “Solitude and Freedom: A Response to Saul Newman on Stirner and Foucault”, *Postmodern Culture* 14.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

coming up against what one is not. In fact, Smith himself points to the fluid ability of identity formation by noticing the peculiar structure of Stirner's argument itself: "What saves *The Ego and His Own* from this stalemate is actually the work's fitfulness, the *shifty self-disruption* of Stirner's prose and line of thought. Just as the circle seems ready to close, there is a heave and *another possibility breaks open*."<sup>36</sup> Both Smith and Newman hold that perhaps there is a middle ground between individual solitary isolation and authoritarian control, one of "collective intercourse" in which individuals come together. Stirner's essentially open sense of the self thus forms the basis for such a collective conversation. What would such a development involve? This brings us to Gadamer's theory of hermeneutic discourse.

Gadamer reassumes the position held by Heidegger that "we always find ourselves within a situation... [where] throwing light on a task is never entirely finished," and that this situation, by necessity, always includes others.<sup>37</sup> Our understanding always has a horizon which includes everything (and everyone) perceived from our vantage point, not only that which is both spatially and temporally near, but also that which is yet to be realized. Again we are held into the pure potentiality that is nothingness. Understanding begins with an initial conception "which is capable of projecting before itself a new projection of meaning... and this constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and reinterpretation."<sup>38</sup> In relation to Nietzsche's nihilism, where there exists no set

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (London: Continuum Publishing, 2006) 301.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 269

Truth or Meaning, this illustrates Intuitive Man's process of self-overcoming, since there is no limit to the "broadening of one's horizons." He is free to play with meaning and engage in hermeneutic reinterpretation given the openness of his being. Gadamer also holds that the self is not static, for if it were, no hermeneutic discourse would be possible—there must be room for development. He claims "this exploration of the 'I' as phenomenon is not exploring the 'inner perception' of a real 'I,' nor is it the mere reconstruction of consciousness...but a highly differentiated theme of transcendental reflection."<sup>39</sup>

Charles Taylor, in his essay "Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes", further explains the volatile situation of an individual involved in hermeneutic discourse. He claims that in the end, there is always an "identity cost" that goes along with such broadening of horizons. The 'I' undergoes a change, and its 'identity' is thereby remade. One may recall Stirner's proclamation: "But it is not the ego that is all, but the ego destroys all, and only the self-dissolving ego, the never-being ego, the finite-ego is really I...I speak of me, the transitory ego."<sup>40</sup> Already we see a tendency in Stirner's thought that would suggest openness to hermeneutic discourse. The key to reconciling Stirner's egoism and the humanistic strivings of hermeneutic discourse is to reevaluate his notions of destruction and negation. Gadamer himself also uses "negative" language to express something very positive, as he "sees understanding as an experience of negation...wherein our previous sense of reality is undone,

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 237

<sup>40</sup> Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, trans. Steven T. Byington (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2005) 163.

refuted, and shows itself as needing to be reconstituted.”<sup>41</sup> (282). According to Gadamer, it is a structural necessity that an understanding individual negate and reevaluate parts of himself. Stirner’s egoism, where the individual exercises unlimited self-overcoming through the shedding of his preconceptions and ideals, then appears to be the precondition of understanding others with whom you live in your Heideggerian “situation”. One might argue that an egoist would not care to understand others around him, and that while Stirner advocates self-overcoming, this overcoming does not rule out a total disregard for others. This misunderstanding is due to the colloquial conceptions of “egoism”—one can easily overlook the positive outcome of Stirner’s open individuality. True egoism does not rule out concern for others if the ego itself is enriched by engaging with the others. Through a fusion of horizons, one “undergoes a shift” and “our horizon is extended to take in this possibility, which was beyond its limit before.”<sup>42</sup>

The idea of hermeneutic understanding does not figure solely in abstract philosophical thought. In practice, it has ethical implications in the realm of politics and human rights. When discussing the positive nature of Stirner’s egoism, Smith and Newman focus primarily on the identification among individuals in a common situation for a common cause. However, this identification is not enough, as there has to be an element of disagreement in order to work towards an understanding. Smith’s ideal “collective intercourse,” which he calls “the source of individual redemption,” does not come about through an egoistic

---

<sup>41</sup> Charles Taylor, “Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes” in *Gadamer’s Century*. Ed. Jeff Malpas, et. al. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002) 282.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 287.

identification with the other, but results from an openness within the egoists themselves and their willingness to fuse their horizons in order to develop both themselves and that with which they commonly identify. This goal naturally changes and shifts as understanding develops. As Taylor says in relation to political rights, “coming to an understanding can never have finality...we see that what constitutes perfect understanding at one time may no longer hold good later.”<sup>43</sup>

The ability to pursue a fuller sense of self results from this lack of finality. If there existed some ultimate truth, or some static, infinite sense of self, individual striving would necessarily be limited. There would be a cap placed on Nietzsche’s Will to Power, and a limit to Stirner’s self-dissolution. The Ego strives meaningfully because it must. To repeat Sartre, “the transcendental subject must *make himself be*.” Once the striving and actualizing of potentiality halts, the subject is “done, dead” and reduced to a mere object, no longer able to transcend his situation and project himself into the nothingness of potentiality. Though futural projection is always done on behalf of one’s self, with its individual end in mind, the striving is not enacted in a solitary egoistic cell, but is enmeshed in a situation, within an inter-subjective horizon of being. As Heidegger claims, human individuals are distinct in that they ask the question of being, the “Why is there something rather than nothing?” It is only through engagement with this question, and engagement of this question with others, that one is allowed to see herself as a dynamic striving subject, standing out against the background of nothingness. As long as individuals question the meaning of their individual being

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 240.

they will continue to build themselves up, for “questions always bring out undetermined *possibilities*.”<sup>44</sup>

## Bibliography

Bergner, Jeffrey. “Stirner, Nietzsche, and the Critique of Truth.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 11, no. 4.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer. London: Continuum Publishing, 2006.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962.

Heidegger, Martin. “What is Metaphysics?” In *Basic Writings*, Ed. David Krell, 89-110. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. Trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, Ed. Bernard Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Douglas Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

---

<sup>44</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (London: Continuum Publishing, 2006). 368.



Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On Truth and Lies in their Extramoral Sense." *The Friedrich Nietzsche Reader*. Ed. Keith Ansell Pearson, Duncan Large. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006.

Newman, Saul. "Spectres of Freedom in Stirner and Foucault: A Response to Caleb Smith's 'Solitude and Freedom'". *Postmodern Culture* 14, no. 3  
[http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/postmodern\\_culture/v014/14.3newman.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/postmodern_culture/v014/14.3newman.html)

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1984.

Smith, Caleb. "Solitude and Freedom: A Response to Saul Newman on Stirner and Foucault. *Postmodern Culture* 14, no. 3.  
[http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/postmodern\\_culture/v014/14.3smith.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/postmodern_culture/v014/14.3smith.html)

Stirner, Max. *The Ego and His Own*. Trans. Steven T. Byington. New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2005.

Taylor, Charles. "Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes." *Gadamer's Century*. Ed. Jeff Malpas, et. al. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002.

West, Thomas G. "Max Stirner's Egoism (review)". *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 18, no. 1  
[http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=journal\\_of\\_the\\_history\\_of\\_philosophy](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=journal_of_the_history_of_philosophy).